

A 3
CHARGE

DELIVERED TO THE

CLERGY

OF THE

ARCHDEACONRY OF ST. ALBAN'S,

AT THE

VISITATION,

HELD JUNE 5, A.D. 1800.

Br JOSEPH HOLDEN POTT, A.M.

PREBENDARY OF LINCOLN, AND ARCHDEACON OF ST. ALBAN'S.

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1800.

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OF THE

DIocese of St. Albans



1850

WILLIAM H. HODGSON, Esq.

Secretary of the Diocese of St. Albans

Diocese of St. Albans

1850

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TO THE REVEREND THE
CLERGY
OF THE
ARCHDEACONRY OF ST. ALBAN'S:

THE FOLLOWING
DISCOURSE

IS DEDICATED,
BY THEIR FAITHFUL SERVANT,

THE AUTHOR.

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MY REV. BRETHREN,

WHEN I address you at these times, I am not unmindful that my pretensions for directing your regard to any subject of our joint concern, can only be supported on the ground of that solicitude which attaches to the duties of my station. The cogency of that motive I collect from the relation in which I stand to those who are the dispensers of religious truth, and the constituted guides of others. I shall frame the few reflections which I have to offer at the present moment, with the same desire by which my endeavours have been stimulated upon similar occasions, and by which I have been enabled to surmount the impressions of well founded diffidence. It has ever been my wish, that we may come together for the better. The happiest opportunities for improvement which this life can furnish, are those which permit us to enjoy the conference of considerate persons, who

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are interested in one cause, and governed with the same intentions.

In that spiritual law which Christ came to establish with perpetual sanctions, you must, without doubt, have observed that many tenders of religious service, many modes of life, and numberless particulars of conduct, are left subject to the rules of prudence, and are trusted to the guidance of a sober and enlightened judgment. I shall invite you to regard some points of our common duty, which are to be regulated by that free discretion.

It made part of the design of the new covenant on its publication, to release men from the meaner elements and trammels of preliminary dispensations. Many narrow and precise particulars of duty, which were not necessary of themselves to the great end of spiritual profit, were thus to be withdrawn. It became the glory of the Gospel scheme, to restore to man so much of the integrity of his nature, that his steps might be able to pursue the ways of truth, with readiness; unfettered by restraints and not driven by compulsive instigations. This is the liberty which the great Deliverer of mankind has furnished; a liberty

liberty most worthy of the reasonable soul; a freedom from the impediments and incapacities of a fallen state, and from the bondage of minute and servile forms of duty; a freedom from the manifold observances imposed during the nonage of the world for temporary ends, but which once abolished, can never be revived by any less authority. Thus all regulations made for salutary purposes in the Christian household, must be framed with a due regard both to the laws of Christ, and to those general but solid grounds of prudence and discretion which are founded in the gospel charter. In conformity to these perpetual laws and privileges, delivered in our Saviour's sacred word, taught by his precepts, and set forth in the main tenor of his Gospel, the liberal scheme of government which prevails in this land in things relating to religion, has been fashioned and established.

It is true that such rules, framed in agreement with evangelical principles, and fitted to the chief design of rational improvement, require a tenfold vigilance, in proportion to the generous spirit which they breathe. This is the great point at which I aim.

When I speak of prudence and discretion in matters relating to religion, I confine my subject to those things which are left free by the laws of Christ, or which rest upon general principles. I am well aware that the whole form of government in the Christian Church, has been referred to such grounds of discretion. Even among those who adhere to the pattern which was set by the Apostles, some have been inclined to favour this opinion. They have intimated, that the model which was laid down by our Lord's Apostles, might be chosen by them as best suited to their own times. They observe, that the Apostles, in regulating the Churches which they planted, did not make any formal declaration that the Christian household should be ordered in like manner through succeeding generations. From this silence they imagine, that room may be left for the exercise of discretion, whether in changing or retaining the frame of Apostolical appointments. But when solemn and repeated actions serve at any time to indicate the purpose of superiors, surely it is most natural, without doubt it is most respectful, to frame our judgment, concerning their intentions, from their conduct. It is safer to conclude, that if they do not lay down more explicit and precise injunctions, it is because their own appointments furnish
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a sufficient proof of their design, and bind with an adequate authority. In this inference there is no danger at all; but in the other, men may be mistaken as to the mind of the Apostles, and nothing will be certain but the deviation from their practice*. Nor are such conjectures necessary to the ends

* The distinction made by Grotius is yet more nice, for he admits the apostolical appointment and defends it largely; and acknowledges yet further the approbation of Christ thereupon, as expressed in the apocalypse. But he remarks that there is a great difference between both these sanctions, and a divine command. "Christus ergo scribens illis
"episcopis, ut eminentibus in Clero, haud dubiè eminentiam hanc
"episcopalem probavit." But he goes on to observe, "episcopalem
"eminentiam non esse divini præcepti. Probatur hoc satis, quia non
"probatur contrarium. Nusquam enim Christus hoc præcipisse legitur.
"Probavit sanè in apocalypsi, sed non statim hoc præcipitur, quod probatur.
"Apostolicæ institutionis est episcopatus, quia apparet in nonnullis
"ecclesiis ab apostolis ordinatos episcopos aut approbatos. Sed ut in
"quaque ecclesiâ essent tales episcopi, nusquam apostoli præceperunt." Again, "sed ut alibi diximus non utique præcepti est divini quicquid ab
"apostolis institutum est. Multa enim instituuntur salvâ mutandi libertate." But observe well the instances he brings of this; they appear to me to fall short entirely of the importance of the point in question, and if so, they leave all his positions concerning the apostolic institution of episcopacy, and its approbation by the Redeemer, sound and entire, without a fair presumption for mere liberty of change, which cannot be deduced.

ends for which they are brought forward. They are adopted either as tending to conciliate and unite divided parties, or as a liberal apology for the judgment of those who deduced from variations in much inferior matters. His examples are "Ut populus clarâ voce amen responderet; ut qui docet adaperto capite esset, in apostolicâ ecclesiâ constitutum videmus hodie multis in locis non observatur." He then turns to the remark of Epiphanius, that some churches were left for a while without a bishop when fit persons were not found. H. Grotii de imperio summarum potestatum circa sacra, p. 345, and p. 355. Paris 1648.

The learned Scultetus agrees in opinion with Grotius, and goes yet further in maintaining the episcopal cause; for when he speaks of a certain period during the lives of the apostles, when the names of bishops and presbyters were common, and when "the church was governed by the common advice of presbyters, the apostles reserving episcopal authority to themselves;" he explains his meaning to be no more than this, that for such interval, the apostles governed the church not placing bishops over any churches, "so long as they were present or near them;" and for this reason, "that first of all companies must be gathered together, before we can define any thing concerning their perpetual government." Now certainly it cannot be denied that many converts might be drawn together, before they had the episcopal government assigned to them as several Churches. But it is quite enough for us, if, when a form of government came to be established by the Apostles themselves,

who vary from us in such matters. With regard to the first design, let us not be forward to detract from any candid or conciliating mode of speaking; and although the zeal of many would not, perhaps, be much abated if all men were contented to maintain their differences as the fruits only of their own choice, yet, without doubt, the reasonable would be more inclined to forego that which claims a preference in their own opinion, than to give up what they take to be determined by divine authority. But as long as rules and precedents exist in Scripture on such subjects, we cannot find ourselves at liberty to disregard them, on the bare presumption that they might not be intended for our times. Nor will such conjectures serve the purpose of apology for existing differences; because, were the form left free, the duty of uniting in the choice,

themselves, their Lord's approbation following thereupon, (both which points Scultetus lays down as strongly as Grotius,) the Episcopal form was established; nor does it signify much whether that form was appointed for the reason given by St. Jerome, in whose singular opinion Scultetus seems to agree.—See the Determination of the Question, &c. by Scultetus, as quoted by Bp. Hall, vol. iii. p. 252, of his works.—I regard these testimonies of foreigners, both of them members of Churches wanting episcopal government, as very remarkable.

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for the great ends of harmony and concord, would still bind on every side. But conciliating views, and charitable sentiments may be preserved, without such departures from the page of Scripture. With regard to foreign Churches, it is enough to acknowledge and lament the necessities, under which they laboured, as to these particulars. Necessity was their plea. They judged that the most essential purposes of Christianity might be satisfied, although some things relating to the ministry were varied, and although the distributions of the spiritual rule were not kept exactly to the antient standard. This was their defence; and it was admitted by the best Lights of our own Church. In a memorable instance, where the matter of episcopacy was urged, they who were called upon to restore that form of government, were contented to return this short but significant reply, "Non sumus adeò felices." *

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* The answer made by the President of the Synod of Dort to Bp. Hall. — Briefly then, it is one thing to suppose that the Apostles refrained from adding precept to their practice in these matters, in order that succeeding generations might exercise a free discretion on such points; against which notion, as too easy, light, and conjectural, I have ventured to suggest a caution; and it is another thing to admit with many divines of the first

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From this instance, where discretionary freedom cannot, I think, be challenged with propriety, we may now turn our thoughts to some particulars where that free discretion, which is conducive to the main ends of personal improvement, and which may justly claim its privilege, has been unwarrantably limited; where restraints have been imposed upon the consciences of men, in a manner inconsistent with the general tenor of the Gospel rules and liberties, and destructive of man's reasonable service. For such examples we have but to turn back our view to those times, when the same power to bind the conscience which belongs

note in our Church ever since the Reformation, that there may be a difference between an Apostolical institution, and a Divine precept of perpetual obligation; or between things essentially and immutably necessary to the being of a Church, and things without which a Church may subsist safely, though defectively; and again, between that which is best, and most consonant to Scripture, and that which may be taken up out of necessity, under certain circumstances. To one or other of these testimonies, we have the authority of the best names among our divines. The absence of a positive precept may allow men to give way to necessity, but it will not invest them with a free discretion to go counter to the highest authority in point of fact. If precedent and fact do not establish right, yet they have some weight; and whatever that is, it must restrain mere liberty of choice.

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only to the laws of God, was ascribed to laws and canons which were multiplied at will; and when the salutary power which is vested in the Church, for wise and profitable purposes, was extended in an arbitrary manner to very hurtful and extravagant decrees, or to things extremely trivial in their nature. Of the former kind, was that stupendous exercise of power which took from the lips of thousands, the cup which Christ sanctified for all. This was not indeed a limitation of discretionary privilege, but a direct infringement of the word and ordinance of the Redeemer: a restraint for which nothing has ever been pretended but bare ecclesiastical authority. By the same warrant of authority, extended far beyond its rightful limits, the arbitrary imposition of celibacy was laid upon the whole body of the Clergy in the western church. The known usage of the first age of Christianity, contradicted this unjust and mischievous restraint; nor could the silence of our Lord's Apostles be pleaded in this case. St. Paul declared in the most express terms, that he would not lay that yoke upon any. His advices were calculated, if not to times of persecution and removal, which seems probable, yet to that free discretion which he vindicated so distinctly on this point. From the same source of inordinate authority, were
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derived also the special limitations and restraints by which the methods of religious abstinence at fixed times and seasons, were so bound upon the conscience, that no place remained for the measures of discretion; except men would submit to seek that discretion in the breasts of others, which Christ hath left to be collected from the general lessons of his word, from the state and circumstances, the needs, or the proficiency of different persons; and, according to these rules, from the dictates of the mind, and the just prescriptions of a duly exercised authority. I remark with pleasure, that the methods which were taken in our Church for retaining what was good and helpful, and fit to be prescribed in these respects, were such as have plainly indicated, that the privilege of conscience was restored, whilst the salutary ends of public order, and spiritual profit, were secured. Thus, when the former bonds were broken, the true image of religious harmony returned. The light of truth exposed those endless niceties, and banished those unmeaning differences in the use of things, those highly superstitious scruples, and insignificant distinctions, by which the minds of men had been enslaved. A bondage, which if it were not precisely Jewish, was at least as narrow, and as troublesome. I need not, I hope, dwell longer

on this point, in order to shew that prudence and discretion, rightly exercised in such matters, are things extremely different from disuse and neglect. I shall hasten, therefore, to the main particulars, which rest now for consideration.

With regard then, to the habits of domestic life, and the modes of social intercourse; with respect to civil matters, where some concern about such things is found to be compatible with our profession; with regard also to the pursuits of science, and the various scope of literary studies, such of them I mean as are not needful to the ministerial character, or not connected with the main branch of sacred learning, with relation to all these particulars, much is left free: not that the character which belongs to us, may be permitted to fit loose upon us; not that it may be shifted or assumed by turns, merely to gratify a wayward will, or to give room for interfering in things which belong more properly to others; much less are these things left free in order that we may be permitted to follow a vacant and unmeaning mode of life, consuming our time in occupations which take their origin, and find their termination in this world. If much scope
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be allowed to us, it is in order that the pattern which we have to set, may be extended to all things which are reasonable and becoming; it is in order that the sphere of human knowledge and experience may be suitably enlarged, and that the means and ability for forming right judgments concerning the sentiments, the needs, and the interests of others, may be more effectually cultivated. In framing these considerations we cannot surely lose sight of what the Apostle has suggested, that where there is liberty and freedom for good purposes, there it is of all things the most ungenerous and disgraceful to render such advantages the cover for abuses; until it shall seem to be expedient to replace a mean and narrow discipline fit only for the rudest minds. It was a convincing demonstration that the minds of men were barbarous and rude, when many canons were enacted concerning which we read. By some of these decrees, many things were prescribed in various parts of christendom, about which men of sense and judgement could not require instruction, and in which they might even blush to be directed. Nor does it appear that such rules ever wrought the desired effect. A better spirit was to be encouraged: but a better spirit could not be excited by rules which were only calculated for

for untutored and contracted minds. The advancement of sound learning, and the growth of spiritual knowledge were to be promoted, before such irregularities, the fruits of gross corruption, could be remedied. It was that good spirit and truly Christian temper, which banished from our church many of those childish forms of discipline, which were adapted only to such as required to be directed where the meanest proficient in the ways of piety and truth might know much better how to bear his character, how to render it becoming to himself, and serviceable to the world.

It must, however, be acknowledged that we rest still short of that discipline which should result from just notions of church unity and order; which should follow from a real sense of the value of the Christian sacraments, and of the rightful ministration of things sacred. We rest still short of that discipline which should spring from an acknowledgement of common ties and common sanctions; from joint interests subsisting in one body, and from those participations which form the privilege of one spiritual household. I need not remind you, my reverend brethren, that if the church established in this country,

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and countenanced by its laws, be according to its undeniable pretension, an ecclesiastical body, united in a sound faith, and communicating rightly in the Christian sacraments; the strictest bond of mutual obligation arises between its ministers, and those who may profit by their spiritual pains. But alas! this bond of fellowship does not subsist unbroken and entire: and many there are who assume to themselves a discretionary freedom, and even an indifference in this point, which is rather calculated to perpetuate and increase divisions, than to heal them. Light and careless preferences, serve only to betray a manifest contempt for unity and order. Let the cause then be tried by its own merits; yet with a true desire to draw nearer to a just accord, and not to encourage distance and division, even on consistent grounds. It is hard to say which is most injurious to the interests of truth and harmony, to maintain all things with an unrelenting partiality, or to render every thing uncertain and even distasteful to the sober and considerate, by perpetual cavils, by unauthorized and fanciful conjectures, or by wild and wandering irregularities. The true way to peace must be by mutual determinations to yield what may be yielded, but not

not by relinquishing the common aim of uniting under the sanction of well-founded principles. Let us be ready then, to support that equal scheme of toleration which is the glory of the British laws, and the genuine result of Christian charity, and Christian prudence. Let us be forward to renounce all forced attachments. Let us lend our voice on all occasions to cast out from the Christian world the gross and horrible impiety of binding men against their consciences to any method of religion. Let us be ready also to give credit to those who vary from us, for the sincerity of their persuasion. Let us encourage every kind and charitable hope concerning them. Let us pay to the wise, the learned, and the pious, who may differ from us, the just tribute of esteem. Let us bless God when they keep the same foundations which we hold. Let us profit as we are able, with their labours, and live with them in perfect amity. He must have a hardy mind, who can suppose that such persons have no pleasure in their behalf; and he must have an uncharitable heart, who does not consider with joy by whom those pleasures will be weighed, and to whose hands the scales of judgment are committed. Let us strive then to heal divisions,

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and use all seasonable efforts to remove impediments to that end: but let us not neglect the care and vindication of well-formed principles, built upon scriptural foundations: let us not relinquish the tried defences of our own judgment, by inconsideration, by gratuitous conjectures, or by dubious and equivocal desertions. It is hard to be repeating arguments which are often answered only by neglect, and counteracted even by those who separate upon no acknowledged principles. But it is a false measure of discretion to encourage such deviations, by neglecting to employ fit means of remedy.

I have already noticed that something is left free to us in points which relate to social intercourse; in matters where the civil welfare of our country is concerned; and in the varieties of literary pursuits. Such a freedom I contend for, as shall not hinder the regular and constant exercise of essential duties: such a freedom as shall be consistent with the best aims, and compatible entirely with that decided preference to spiritual objects and attainments which should always mark the pastoral character, and distinguish it from common occupations. I will here add, that I contend also for a freedom from capricious judgments,

ments, exercised by voluntary Censors. Upon this head I shall now propose a few remarks.

The love of dictating to others in religious matters, according to a man's peculiar humour, is incident to well meaning persons. Let us then be sure to take such admonitions in good part, even when the Monitors may chuse to set up their own habits as the standard of religion, and perhaps as the tests of piety and grace. Concerning real blemishes, let no reproof be spared, and let such censures and advices never be regarded with resentment. Let all deviations from character and duty, be exposed to view, and condemned in any sober way. Again, if admonitions be proposed to us with regard to things which are of little moment, nay, if they should chance to be nice or narrow, scrupulous, or harsh, provided they be well intended, let us take them in good part. Let us be ready always to prove ourselves; to examine whether that which we allow in our deportment, be entitled to the deliberate approbation of the conscience. Let us never shun that test, or retain one habit which shall not be able to abide that scrutiny. But let us remember that we have the laws and lessons of our Lord, the privileges of his covenant,

venant, and the sober rules of our spiritual household for our guidance and direction. There are no persons in all society more obnoxious to voluntary censures, than we are; none upon whom they are bestowed more freely. I am far from wishing that any limits should be put to this freedom, except the limits of sound reason, and of christian charity. I will explain a little further, why I think these limits should be put. Where a great deal of zeal is laid out in reproofs, with very little reason, many inconveniences will follow. Indifferent things will be magnified into crimes. But he who is told that a thing is sinful, which he knows to be indifferent, will despise the monitor. He will never benefit at all by such mistaken censures. He, on the other hand, who is told to study his own case, and to consider the effects of things upon his own mind, may find, perhaps, that he has something to correct, something which requires to be rescinded. Thus the first Censor will overshoot his mark, but the other, who is more rational and candid, is more searching and effectual in his applications. He will point out many a remedy which fierce and violent opinions will not furnish. He will put many a limit which positive and injudicious zeal will not induce one reasonable person to adopt. Among the va-

rious circumstances which may render some things more or less fit to diverse persons, many there are, no doubt, which are peculiar to our order. We shall do well to consider them with caution and exactness; but let us consider them by the rules of God's holy word, and by the dictates of reason and propriety. To us it belongs to weigh deeply and seriously, the great duty which binds us to consult at all times the sure or even the probable effects of what we do, whether upon our own minds, or upon the minds of others. To us it belongs, to keep in view the perpetual obligation of avoiding even the appearances of evil. To us it belongs, to be ready always to yield somewhat of our own freedom to the feebleness of others, that the weak and prejudiced may not take offence. To us it belongs, more especially to regard those precepts, addressed indeed to all, which encourage us to strive always to excel, and to covet earnestly the best gifts. Having remarked why voluntary censures, which I do not deprecate, should be limited to the bounds of reason, few words will be necessary to shew how fit it is that they should be restrained within the limits of charity. Where that is neglected, the voice of censure will be accompanied with injurious and perverted statements, with insinuations and reflections, calculated to provoke hard thoughts, and even to encourage
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ill will and contempt. Before I quit this topic of discourse, which relates to voluntary censures, I cannot but advert to one species of censure which is sometimes unreasonable, and if it be not uncharitable, yet it may have the same effects which would follow from uncharitable censures. What peremptory judgments do we sometimes hear concerning the fittest modes of teaching; concerning compositions and discourses for the pulpit, and even about the method of delivering them. How many do not hesitate to dictate as the only profitable method of discourse, that which affects themselves, or suits best with their tempers. Such models must pass exclusively for the preacher's rule. It would be easy to shew that such directions are frequently drawn so as to be incompatible with the best model of instruction, and with general utility. Thus in ordinary congregations there will be some, it may be hoped, who have trod the ways of early faith; some too, who may have passed the first straits of repentance, when it takes place at later periods; there will be some to whom the free spaces and the chearful themes of good hope and mature proficiency may be opened. Will you cast off all discourses which are calculated for such persons? It is true likewise, that in ordinary congregations, there are also some with whom sober disquisitions

on the most important subjects, with whom solid and exact discourses, persuasive demonstrations of divine truth, proofs and explanations, counsels and advices may be expended to no purpose; with whom the words of wisdom and of knowledge may prove flat, and ineffectual; men who can only be shaken from their sleep by cries and terrors. Of all this I am duly sensible, and it well deserves the preacher's notice. But my meaning is, that the Great Guide and Instructor is wiser than the wisest censors: much wiser than they who would dictate one kind of speech for all times and purposes, and one method of discourse to be employed on all occasions: God fashions various means and instruments for various ends: nor does he deny that free discretion to his messengers. When they speak to all, as they must do from the pulpit, they have the Gospel for their rule. The Gospel speaks to all. It speaks, therefore, with a various tone. It opens to the mind a thousand needful and instructive topics. It omits no point of faith. It passes no particular of duty. It addresses men in every stage of their conversion, and in all periods of their progress. That teacher must be miserably fettered, who, in order to retain the favour of his auditors, is condemned to traverse a few favourite topics. I congratulate you, my
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Reverend Brethren, that you are not exposed to this temptation, which might operate, imperceptibly perhaps, to the disadvantage of the main interests of truth and righteousness. With regard to this whole branch of the pastoral duty, sure I am that no conscientious preacher will ever feel himself entirely satisfied with his most assiduous labours. He will fear perpetually, lest one topic or another may have passed unnoticed, or may not have been sufficiently enforced. He will be full of apprehension, lest what he says may be unseasonable, ill-adapted to his hearers, or ill-calculated to the needs of some among them. He will be jealous even of his own improvements. He will forego the results of many studious hours, and check the scope of his own genius and reflections, in order, where occasion shall require, to frame suitable addresses to the least informed, and to convey instruction to the dullest of his hearers. Enough of this anxiety will be felt by those who are truly mindful of their charge: but it is hard, when such pains and solicitude shall be exerted, to be censured, often at one hearing, upon some fanciful account. Many who are ready to dispense such censures, would do well to consider that it forms no light part of the preacher's duty, to press not only what his hearers are inclined to favour,

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and most apt to entertain with readiness, but what they may chance to need the most, or be most disposed to under-value.

I have now run through the few remarks which I shall submit at this time to your notice. With the truest satisfaction I repeat it, that the spiritual regimen established in our Church, is wise as well as liberal—it attaches the best springs of human conduct; but it requires, indeed, to be observed with equal prudence, equal generosity, with singleness of mind, and with the choice and application of the whole heart. I trust I have addressed myself to those who will not be induced to slight the main duties of the Christian life, or to neglect its more minute particulars, because so many measures of them rest where Christ has placed them, upon general principles. I have addressed myself, I trust, to those who will remember, that a large and uniform tender of obedience, and of reasonable service, is expected under a law which has the divine perfections for its standard. Such is the law of Christ. It sets forth the rules of universal righteousness. It discloses every motive to well-doing. It is a law manifested by God's especial word and revelation, and conformable to man's essential nature. It is bound upon

the soul by every tie of interest and obligation, of hope and gratitude, of free desires and noble emulation. In complying with these terms of Evangelical obedience, you will find that they do not form a rule of worldly prudence and discretion, much less of licentious freedom; they form a rule of moral and religious liberty, of freedom from undue restraints inconsistent with the laws and privileges of the Gospel, and from subjection to capricious censures. Let us then so strive to follow all things with a view to spiritual benefit, in the fear of God, in the faith of his only begotten Son, in the light of grace, in the testimony of the conscience, in the unity of the spirit, and in the bond of peace and order which are established so happily in that Church, to whose ministry you have been called.

Greatly does it behove us, my Reverend Brethren, friends, and fellow-labourers, to take heed that we do not become such as may seem, once more, to have need of stricter limitations, and less honourable bonds. Much does it behove us, to take heed that we do not shew ourselves to be

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incapable of a truly spiritual prudence, and unfit for an easy yoke*.

* Some points which are touched in this Charge, are considered more largely in a Sermon, put to press at the same time.

THE END.

